

THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF ART

ART IN CINEMA
Series Three

A SPECIAL NOTE on THE CAGE by its director, Sidney Peterson:

THE CAGE (1947) Directed by Sidney Peterson. Photography by Hy Hirsh. Production by Workshop 20, California School of Fine Arts.

Since THE CAGE is, among other things, a kind of philosophic essay in the vernacular of film, it may not be improper to describe it as non-Aristotelian. It is based on an aesthetic derived from what Professor Boas has called the self-evident proposition that a work of art is what it is both because of the artist who makes it and the person who sees and interprets it, the conception, in short, that the Aristotelian absorption of works of art into the natural order instead of into the so-called order of human nature, was a mistake. The circumstances of its Workshop origin called for a work conspicuously of the human order, non-abstract, objective in detail, making full use of the camera's uncanny ability to parody the incomprehensible integration of human experience with the inclusiveness of a vision untrammelled by the prejudicial intellect. Hence the pursuit of the abstract on the level only of the idea tending, in accordance with its own nature and the nature of its attachments, toward abstraction. Hence, too, the suggestion of a rationale that may be easily mistaken for surrealist or even psychiatric, not to say psychotic. THE CAGE was not intended to be a portrait of a schizophrenic in air-conditioned confinement. It has about as much to do with Bunuel-Dali as the eggcase of a female cockroach has to do with Hieronymus Bosch. It may look like, act like, but it's not. What is involved is a complicated equation of ideas and images, the whole point of the solution of which is that X is allowed to continue to remain X, equal to itself only. So much for the philosophic, not to say mathematical aspect. Besides being a balanced equation, THE CAGE is a somewhat comic fable and as such may be deciphered as easily as a last month's bill. The moral (assuming that a fable without a moral is not merely unmoral but unthinkable) may be stated in the form of a query. Not how low is down but how deep is an ascension? Or, perhaps better, what every young man should know includes the Golden Bough. Or more simply, this is where we came in.

If half a century from now somebody falls off a ladder as a result of a sudden realization that the gradual coming into focus of a plaster bust in the opening shot represents the history of art from blur to plug hat, thus disposing in four feet of film of the absurd tradition that the aesthetic impulse is a dolled-up version of the involitional mimicry of butterflies and shellfish, the producers of the film cannot, of course, be responsible. Such compressions of meaning are inseparable from the non-Aristotelian position. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suppose that most of THE CAGE'S obscurities, such as they are, may be safely disregarded except by those who have a taste for such things. I merely wish to point out that the period of incubation for an idea caught from a film (or anything else) may be a lifetime and it is entirely unnecessary for an audience to break out in a rash of significations before the lights go on.

Workshop 20 was established at the California School of Fine Arts in order to give a few painters some collaborative experience in a medium with which they were familiar only in the ordinary way; a medium, moreover, peculiarly free of the aborting influence of styles and periods of painting too often serving as points of departure for rather unfresh experience. It was felt that the use of a production of a film as a device for the discovery of significant imagery in the everyday appearances of things might result in some discoveries which, if made, would be of use to painters. The advantages of film for pedagogy in general are too well known to repeat. The special advantages of a sort of cinematic pedagogy in depth for people who will, if the pedagogy is successful, eschew every form of it, have still, for the most part, to be explored. Certainly the making of THE CAGE by no means exhausted the possibilities in that direction.